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ABSTRACT

Although many studies have concluded that males are more aggressive than females in a variety of situations, significant variation exists among individuals in their willingness to respond to provocation with aggressive behavior. The pervasiveness of the sex role stereotyping of aggressiveness as a masculine trait and passivity as a feminine trait suggests that self-rated sex roles, as measured by the Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI), may predict different response tendencies in individuals confronted by an interpersonal provocation. Masculine, feminine, and androgynous subjects (N=60) of both sexes were selected from their BSRI scores and placed in a situation that ostensibly demanded cooperation with a same-sex confederate on a physically tiring task. Provocation consisted of the confederate's selfishness in maximizing personal gain by working harder on individual reward trials and less on the subject's trials. Gender differences were found in the manner in which subjects responded to this provocation. Differences also emerged within each sex along the lines of self-rated sex role; individuals of the same sex role but differing in biological sex had substantially different responses. (NRB)

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RESPONSES TO INTERPERSONAL PROVOCATION: EFFECTS OF GENDER AND SEX ROLE[1]

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This paper presents the results of a study on the effects of subjects' self-rated sex role on the response to an interpersonal provocation from a same-sex confederate. The provocation took the form of a refusal on the part of the confederate (C) to participate as instructed on a supposedly cooperative task. As a result, the subject received less monetary reward than the confederate. In a series of scripted comments made during pauses in the task, the confederate articulated more and more clearly to the subject that s/he was acting selfishly. Thus the experimental situation entailed the perpetration of an objective injustice upon subjects as a result of C's selfishness. We observed subjects' cognitive appraisal of the developing situation and the injustice it comprised as well as subjects' responses to it.

Sex Roles and Aggression

Numerous studies in recent decades have concluded that males are more aggressive than females in a wide variety of situations.[2] Given that masculinity is often equated with aggressiveness in many cultural contexts, the formative societal influence of this sex role expectation is apparent.[3] Yet significant variation exists among individuals in their willingness to respond to provocation with aggressive behavior.[4] Not all males are aggressive, and not all females are non-aggressive.

Recent research has demonstrated the import of cognitive factors in mediating the labeling of physiological arousal states in ways that affect aggressive responding towards the perceived target of the arousal.5 Differences in aggressiveness among individuals may reflect generalized tendencies to cognitively appraise a situation as anger arousing. Furthermore, differences exist in the degree to which individuals will act upon aroused anger with aggressive behavior patterns as opposed to alternative paths of action.[6]

This study was designed to test the idea that self-rated sex roles, as measured on the Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI)[7] predict different response tendencies in individuals confronted with an interpersonal provocation. The pervasiveness of the sex role stereotyping of aggressiveness as a hallmark of masculine virtue and the corresponding stereotyping of passivity as a feminine trait informs this general hypothesis. More specifically, we hypothesized that masculine males would be easily aroused to anger and most likely of all subjects to retaliate against C when offered the opportunity to do so. In contrast, we expected feminine individuals (as rated on the BSRI) to respond to interpersonal provocation with passive withdrawal. We expected them to be slow to anger and preferentially indirect in their reactions to the confederate, as well as

non-aggressive.

We hypothesized that to the extent that androgynous individuals were truly both "masculine" and "feminine" to some degree, then they would demonstrate another type of response to the non-cooperating confederate. We reasoned that androgynous subjects would neither aggress in the fashion of masculine subjects, nor allow an injustice to be perpetrated against their own interests in the passive fashion we expected of feminine subjects. We wondered if androgynous subjects might demonstrate a creative capacity for nonviolent assertiveness under under the exigencies of our task situation.

The exploratory nature of this study precluded more specific hypotheses than these. Accordingly, we constructed an experimental situation which enabled us to gather a wide range of observational data, questionnaire self-ratings from the subjects, and an operational measure of retaliatory non-verbal responses.

Methods

Subjects were pre-selected from the Psychology 1 subject pool based on their BSRI scores and solicited to participate in an experiment called "Motivation to Cooperate." We chose masculine, feminine and androgynous subjects of each biological sex using the median split

procedure for scoring the BSRI.

The subjects were placed in a situation that ostensibly demanded cooperation with a same-sex partner on a physically tiring task. They were led to believe that they would be generating a combined voltage output on a 2-person hand-cranked dynamo. We claimed that our purpose was to observe the degree of cooperation of subject teams on this task under different conditions of motivation. We provided monetary rewards for voltage generated by the team on a series of 12 second time trials. Even though we said that we wanted them to cooperate on all trials in maximizing their voltage output from the dynamo, our "motivation" in fact provided rewards for either the subject or C in alternating time trials. We monitored subjects' actual voltage output on the apparatus throughout the series of 16 time trials on which the subject and confederate pedaled.

The provocation consisted of C's blatant selfishness in maximizing his/her own gain by working harder on his/her reward trials and correspondingly less on the subject's trials. The imbalance in rewards was uniformly maintained for all subjects by means of false feedback from the experimenter. C made this selfishness more apparent with a series of scripted remarks concerning his/her lack of interest in cooperation with the subject and happiness with his/her own sizeable rewards.

The time trials were grouped into five blocks of trials after which a rest period was given. During this time, the subjects' behavior in interaction with C was observed and video-taped through the one-way mirror. C's scripted remarks occurred at this time, and questionnaire data on subjects' affective states and ratings of self and partner (C) were gathered during the rest periods after block 4 and again after block 5. Thus we could assess the temporal development of subjects' responses as well as their content over the course of the interaction.

Since we measured subjects' actual voltage effort in each trial, we were able to ascertain their willingness to act selfishly in the task by comparing that effort on reward trials for C versus that for the subject. And we could also observe the extent to which subjects would deprive their partners of rewards by refusing to work for C's reward in the final time trial in the experiment.

Thus our experiment represented a broadly-based attempt to understand the development of various modes of response to provocation. The following results represent the data from 60 subjects (11 masculine males, 9 feminine males, 8 androgynous males, 10 masculine females, 11 feminine females, and 11 androgynous females).

Results

We submitted our observational measures to a principle components analysis to extract highly intercorrelated clusters of input measures segmented by the time frame of their occurrence within the experimental interaction. Questionnaire data were analyzed in a similar fashion. Analyses of variance were computed on subjects' factor scores on these extracted components. We construed the gender and sex role variation on these factor scores as an empirical measure of response mode in the situation. The following summary of findings presents those results which proved statistically significant:

Gender differences emerged in the manner in which subjects responded to this provocation. Females began the interaction with C in a friendlier manner than males, yet they reacted more negatively to C's consistent selfishness as the situation developed over time. They withdrew from verbal interactions and indicated greater hostility towards their partners on written measures compared to males.

Males were clearly aware of C's selfish behavior, but they treated the situation more analytically than females. Males attempted to engage their partners by questioning the experiment verbally and directly trying to persuade C to alter his behavior. No sex differences were observed in retaliatory behavior in the voltage generating task

Differences also emerged within each sex along the lines of self-rated sex role. The bulk of these findings demonstrated a gender by sex role interaction such that individuals of the same sex role but differing in biological sex produced substantially different responses. the following will attempt to summarize the pattern of results we found, first among males, then among females:

Masculine males were highly attuned to the provocation, as we expected, but they did not appear to respond aggressively towards their antagonist in C. Instead, they engaged their partners competitively and constructed a positive interaction with them. In response to C's unbending selfishness, masculine males showed the highest levels of attempts to change his behavior. We found no evidence of the "macho" dispositional tendency towards anger and retaliation among these subjects as we had initially hypothesized. It seems that masculine males' enjoyment of competitive endeavors dominated any potential for anti-social responses in our situation.

Feminine males seemed shy, inhibited and indirect in their interactions with C in the early and middle phases of the experiment. However, these subjects retaliated the most strongly against C when provided with an opportunity to do so.

The strength of these subjects' retaliation on block 5 may have resulted from feminine males' inhibition of negative reactions to C throughout the early part of the interaction. Perhaps for feminine males then, C's continuing behavior proved the "last straw." The lack of assertive skills in these initially shy subjects may have limited their behavioral options in responding to an escalating provocation (Lee, Zimbardo & Bertholf, 1977). Conflicting self-assessments and upset characterized these subjects' post-retaliation behavior patterns.

Androgynous males seemed to respond the most slowly of all subjects to C's non-cooperative actions. Their questionnaire responses indicated a solid grasp of the reality of C's selfish strategy, yet they did not reveal any early attempts to alter the situation in the fashion we had anticipated. Androgynous males, however, did respond to the final aspect of C's provocation with attempted persuasion. Thus, while these subjects exhibited no aggressiveness, they also seemed to lack the assertiveness demonstrated by masculine males in directly confronting C early in the experiment.

Masculine females, more than other subjects, reacted to the provocation with avoidance, anger, and psychological distancing from C. Their responses differed from masculine males in a fashion which typified the overall pattern of sex

differences discussed earlier.

Feminine females reacted very strongly to C's behavior, but in an indirect and non-confrontative manner. Their responses suggested that they rejected a female partner's non-cooperative behavior as "inappropriate" for a female. Yet despite their high levels of negative evaluation of C as aggressive, and the high levels of self-rated anger arousal in these subjects, feminine females did not retaliate when given the opportunity to do so.

Androgynous females indicated that they were highly attuned to the provocation represented by C's selfish behavior. They attempted to persuade C to change behavior more than other females. Thus androgynous females corresponded to our hypothesis of early assertiveness in the situation. Also, they indicated a moderate level of anger at C on the questionnaire data, but they did not show a greater tendency to retaliate. The response style of androgynous females was similar to that of masculine males in general.

This experiment showed the potential for future work in the study of the effects of individual differences in self-rated sex roles on the perception of a stimulus as anger arousing and the subsequent choice of response to that stimulus.

Reference Notes

[1] This paper represents a condensed version of my Ph.D. thesis of the same title, in the Department of Psychology, Stanford University, June 1979.

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